

News Clippings

October 21, 2008

Fire

Oxford

Oxford resident succumbs to house fire

[Read the Article](#)

Richmond

Cause of deaths determined in fire

[Read the Article](#)

Flooding

Gary

Wanted: Volunteers for flood cleanups

[Read the Article](#)

Munster

Community leaders work post-flood

[Read the Article](#)

Richmond

Money still available for flooding repairs

[Read the Article](#)

Severe Weather

New Albany

Floyd County officially declared disaster area

[Read the Article](#)

New Albany

Southern Indiana Residents Apply For Aid

[Read the Article](#)

Southern Indiana

5 area counties may get aid for infrastructure repairs

[Read the Article](#)



October 21, 2008

Oxford resident succumbs to house fire

By *ERIC WEDDLE*
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OXFORD -- An early Monday morning house fire here is believed to have killed the elderly woman who lived there.

Helen Irene Leathermon, 76, was found dead in the living room of her house on the corner of Plum and Fifth streets, according to Benton County Sheriff Butch Pritchett.

"We think she was overcome by smoke as she was trying to get out," he said.

A neighbor woke up and saw a back portion of Leathermon's house on fire around 3:30 a.m. By the time volunteer firefighters from Oxford and Boswell arrived on scene, the house was fully engulfed, Pritchett said.

Betty Foster, Leathermon's older sister, said the tight-knit Oxford- and West Lafayette-based family is in shock.

"We were all so close and saw each other all the time," she said.

On Saturday, Foster took her younger sister out to a Rochester restaurant.

"She really liked going out to eat," she said. "We had a good time with her."

Leathermon enjoyed baseball, Foster said, often watching games on television. She also followed the Purdue Boilermakers and the University of Kentucky Wildcats.

But her six-grandchildren and three-great-grandchildren were Leathermon's true love.

"She practically raised two of them," Foster said. "The grandchildren made her so happy."

Leathermon worked at the Edgewood View Nursing Home from 1983 until retiring in 1997.

No other injuries were reported in the fire that destroyed the home at 207 W. Plum St. Foster did not expect any items to be salvageable.

The fire also melted the siding on the house directly east of Leathermon's.

Matt Rosenbarger, Benton County deputy coroner, said an official identification of the body or cause of death had yet to be made. An autopsy will be performed today at the Tippecanoe County morgue.

Pritchett said the Indiana State Fire Marshal was called in to investigate the cause of the fire. A cause was unavailable Monday night.

Seeing Leathermon one more time would help, Foster said, but because of the fire there will no viewing.

"We won't get to see her for closure," Foster said, "So that is going to be very hard on us."

-- Contributing: Dorothy Schneider/dschneider@jconline.com

[Back to Fire](#)



October 19, 2008

Cause of deaths determined in fire

RICHMOND -- The mobile home fire that killed a young Richmond couple on Oct. 11 was sparked by a space heater, Indiana Fire Marshal James Greeson said Saturday.

Randy Webb, 29, and Cassie Lowrance, 26, died from smoke inhalation, Greeson said. The couple was dating and had lived at Lot 45 of the Richmond Mobile Home Park since February.

Residents living at the park reported the fire at 3:26 a.m. The first fire personnel arrived at 3:31 a.m.

The Webster Volunteer Fire Department and several other volunteer personnel were dispatched to the park located at the intersection of U.S. 35 and Salisbury Road.

[Back to Fire](#)

Post-Tribune

Wanted: Volunteers for flood cleanups

October 18, 2008

By Christin Nance Lazerus Post-Tribune staff writer

Five weeks after the flood, nearly one hundred houses -- mainly in Gary's Glen Park neighborhood -- remain mold infested and require deep cleaning.

The United Way has plenty of cleaning supplies. What it lacks is manpower.

Volunteer recruiter Laurie A. Griffith said she had a folder of people who committed to cleaning in the aftermath of the flooding, but when she called most people begged off.

"I understand that stuff happens, and half of that is probably legitimate," Griffith said. "I think a very, very small few are nervous about going into Gary."

Interested volunteers should show up at St. Mark's Church, located at 505 W. Ridge Road in Gary.

Griffith said cleaning will go on -- Monday through Saturday -- until it's finished. Volunteers should call or visit the United Way Volunteer Reception Center in Portage, located at 6270 Central Ave. The phone number is 763-3292.

Griffith has contacted Fifth-Third Bank and Indiana University Northwest to encourage people to volunteer.

Griffith said many of these residents can't do the cleaning themselves because they're elderly or suffer from health conditions such as kidney dialysis and emphysema.

Griffith said many houses have mold five feet up, but the residents are still living there. About half the homes require workers to tear down walls and pull up carpet.

Contact Christin Nance Lazerus at 648-3086.

[Back to Flooding](#)

Community leaders work post-flood

BY

CARMEN

McCOLLUM

219.662.5337 | Sunday, October 19, 2008

A month after torrential rain flooded parts of Northwest Indiana, communities and residents are hammering their way to recovery.

Munster Town Manager Thomas DeGiulio, whose community has spent more than \$2.2 million on cleanup alone, said he has gone door-to-door visiting homeowners.

He said officials visited 1,200 homes in areas of mandatory and suggested evacuation. Not everyone was home, he said, but among those who were, homeowners and contractors most often were on the scene working.

He said nine homes with foundation damage were in various states of repair. Thirteen homes still were red-tagged and another 30 had notes from the Police Department asking the residents to call.

"There are a lot of people back in to their homes and working on them even though a number of people are still unable to live in them yet," he said.

At the height of the storm Sept. 14 hundreds of people who lived near the Little Calumet River were evacuated. In some cases, river water mixed with sewage and small fish flooded basements and reached the first level of many homes.

That also was the case on Lake Station's west side where the floodwaters forced evacuations by boat of hundreds of residents, the majority of whom have not yet moved back to their ravaged trailers or homes, Lake Station Mayor Keith Soderquist said.

Utilities still have not been turned on for those residents and inspections of homes by city inspectors continues. A curfew, to prevent looting of abandoned homes, remains in place.

"We still have a checkpoint and security in place, for how long I'm not sure," Soderquist said.

Soderquist said he still does not have a total estimate of flood damage.

Although a few Hobart residents had to be evacuated from their homes, the primary issue from the flood for the city was water damage to the Third Street bridge and Brickie Bowl.

The bridge has since been reopened and Hobart High School played its final regular-season game at the Brickie Bowl on Friday.

For Northwest Indiana residents, the September floods came a month after a tornado touched down in the region, flooding homes and businesses.

Had the levee project been complete, Munster officials maintain they might not have been flooded.

Gatlin Construction Co. began repairing the levee to pre-flood condition Monday, but stopped mid-week because of rain. Work resumed as soon as the rain stopped.

"We intend to have some conversation with the Army Corp of Engineers about what else we can do between now and whenever the levee project is done in Munster to reduce flooding in town," DeGiulio said.

Further east in Portage, the cost of last month's storm topped \$1.3 million.

Damage to and expenses incurred by public entities must top \$7.5 million statewide for the state and any of its municipalities to seek monetary help. Each community that suffered flood damage to its infrastructure or incurred costs as a result of the September flood is compiling the numbers to turn in to federal officials.

Floodwaters closed Indiana University's Gary campus for two weeks. After the first week, the water had receded from the interior of the campus, but the parking lots remained flooded with an estimated 18 to 24 inches of water.

Tamarack Hall, which houses a 600-seat performance auditorium, was the hardest hit building on campus and will be closed permanently, IUN spokeswoman Michelle Searer said.

One wing of Tamarack, which houses the fine arts studio, is expected to remain functional but other areas of the building, constructed in 1959, are closed.

Staff writers Joyce Russell and Deborah Lavery contributed to this report.

[Back to Flooding](#)



October 19, 2008

Money still available for flooding repairs

INDIANAPOLIS -- Money to help farmers fix field problems created by last summer's floods is still available.

Only a small amount of the \$60 million approved for soil assistance projects has been allocated, Office of Disaster Recovery Director Andy Miller said. As much as \$200 million may be needed to repair the damages, Miller said.

"These funds are for our Hoosier farmers. Even if they've applied before and were told they didn't qualify, I strongly encourage them to re-apply through this new system and find out what programs may work best for them. We want to do everything we can to protect Indiana's land and water...and get Indiana agriculture back on track."

Funds available:

- Emergency Conservation Program -- \$10 million in emergency funding to rehabilitate farmland damaged by natural disasters, with 75 percent paid by the federal program. The remaining 25 percent qualifies a farmer for the Indiana Treasurer's Conservation Assistance Program.
- Emergency Conservation Assistance Program -- \$1.4 million to help landowners affected by the flood through local soil and water conservation districts.
- Treasurer's Conservation Assistance Program -- \$50 million is available in low-interest loans to rehabilitate farmland.

Farmers may call (877) 446-2474 or e-mail recovery@isda.in.gov for more information.

[Back to Flooding](#)



Floyd County officially declared disaster area

By **DANIEL SUDDEATH**

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October 18, 2008 02:01 am

— It has been more than a month since hurricane-force winds struck New Albany, but Floyd County has at last been approved for individual assistance through the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA.

The county has been declared a disaster area making its affected residents eligible for financial relief.

Representatives from the Indiana Department of Homeland Security, Small Business Administration, FEMA and other organizations are set to field requests beginning at 8 a.m. Monday at the Floyd County 4-H Fairgrounds, located at 2818 Green Valley Rd.

The location will remain open until Friday, closing each evening at 8 p.m. Floyd homeowners, renters and businesses damaged by the storm are eligible.

FEMA assistance can include grants for temporary housing and home repairs, low-cost loans to cover uninsured property losses and other programs to help individuals and business owners recover from the effects of the disaster, according to a news release from Gov. Mitch Daniels. Daniels said that if approval is received over the weekend, emergency food stamps could also be made available in Floyd as well as Perry, Scott and Washington counties, which were also approved for FEMA relief Thursday.

The U.S. Secretary of Agriculture will make the call on whether food stamps will be issued, according to Daniels.

The Floyd location will serve as a one-stop disaster assistance center where applicants will have phone and computer access to complete applications.

"The storm is long gone, but many of our citizens continue to feel a financial impact," stated New Albany Mayor Doug England in a news release.

England said the city is waiting to hear back on whether the public sector will receive financial assistance to help recoup money the city spent on police and fire overtime as well as hiring private contractors to help with debris removal.

He said Daniels seemed confident New Albany would receive public assistance to offset the expenses which have been covered in part by the city's rainy day fund.

England estimates the city has spent approximately \$700,000 on storm-related services.

"We're elated individual assistance has been granted, and we have been in continuous contact with Gov. Daniels' office in hopes of a declaration for public assistance."

Public assistance would mean the local government along with nonprofit organizations could be approved for up to 75 percent of the cost for debris removal, emergency services related to the

disaster and repairs through federal funds.

The assistance could be used to fix public buildings, such as the city-owned Baptist Tabernacle, which lost its roof during the storm, and the city's salt shed which also received extensive damage.

For individuals unable to get to the FEMA site in Floyd, applications can be made online or by telephone 24 hours a day. The Web site is www.fema.gov/assistance and the organization's phone number is 1-800-621-3362, or 1-800-462-7585 for hearing and speech impaired.

The inclusion of Floyd brings the tally to 20 for counties receiving individual assistance through FEMA in Indiana.

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[Back to Severe Weather](#)



NEW ALBANY, Ind. -- Residents of several counties in southern Indiana who lost power or whose homes were damaged in last month's wind storm can apply for federal disaster assistance beginning Monday.

Representatives from FEMA, the Indiana Department of Homeland Security and the Small Business Administration are on hand to offer assistance.

Doors opened at the 4-H Fairgrounds in Floyd County at 8 a.m., and more than 100 people were already waiting in line.

Many people said that with the slumping economy, they didn't have the money to budget for additional expenses, such as losing all the food in their refrigerators, having to eat out and paying to run generators for several days or even weeks at a time.

Hundreds of residents came to be reimbursed for some of those expenses.

"We had significant wind damage down here, significant power outages, and that led to a lot of loss for folks, and we're here to help as many of them as we can," said Zach Main of the Indiana Family & Social Services Administration.

"I just barely made it through the storm," said area resident Jennifer Cassell. "That put me in the hole. Since the storm, I've literally been in the hole every check."

Residents from Floyd, Perry, Scott and Washington counties can apply for reimbursement at the 4-H Fairgrounds on Green Valley Road in New Albany.

The amount of reimbursement depends on household size and income.

Interested parties can apply between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. through Saturday.

[Back to Severe Weather](#)



October 20, 2008

5 area counties may get aid for infrastructure repairs

Five area counties cleared for assistance

By Grace Schneider

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The windstorm that tore through the region last month caused more than \$6.2 million in damage to publicly owned buildings, utilities and streets in five Southern Indiana counties.

Now, help may be coming to reimburse the devastated communities for the cost of restoring power, fixing other damage and cleaning up.

"We sure need it," said Kent Barrow, Crawford County's emergency management director. "It's going to help a lot."

State officials announced last week that President Bush has approved 14 Hoosier counties -- among them Clark, Crawford, Harrison, Washington and Scott -- for federal public assistance for damage from the severe weather, a remnant of Hurricane Ike. The others were Dearborn, Fayette, Jefferson, Jennings, Lake, Porter, Ripley, Switzerland and Wayne counties.

The declaration for public assistance means that state and local governments and some nonprofit organizations in the designated counties are eligible to apply for federal funds to pay 75 percent of approved costs for debris removal, emergency services related to the disaster, and repairs or replacement of publicly owned facilities.

Gov. Mitch Daniels said as additional damage assessments are completed, more counties may be added to the list. In Floyd County, for example, strong winds ripped most of the roof off the old Baptist Tabernacle building on East Fourth Street in New Albany, a building the city had purchased in March at a sheriff's sale.

And emergency management directors said the damage estimates may increase when state officials tally all reimbursement applications later this month.

Big hit for small community

In the Scott County city of Scottsburg, city crews restored electricity within a day or so after the Sept. 14 storm, but the cleanup is still under way from \$300,000 or more in damage, much of it to the city's utility and broadband Internet service.

"That's a big hit for a small community," Mayor Bill Graham said.

Several area commissioners and mayors, including Graham, have dug into maintenance and public-works budgets to pay for continuing tree removal and emergency repairs.

Hearing that some repayment may be coming is "extra good news," Graham said.

But the string of announcements about applications sent by Daniels' office for federal aid and the resulting disaster-related designations has caused some confusion.

Counties can be declared eligible for federal assistance that goes to individuals and businesses that suffered losses, while being separately approved for aid to help in restoring public facilities.

The latest designations for the 14 counties are intended to also cover municipalities, schools and fire departments within them for storm-related costs.

For those counties, emergency management directors said Friday they expect the Federal Emergency Management Agency to set up meetings soon to explain what comes next.

The state must complete a final sweep of damage and determine the amount eligible for reimbursement, said Rachel Meyer, a state Department of Homeland Security spokeswoman.

Reporter Grace Schneider can be reached at (812) 949-4040.

[Back to Severe Weather](#)